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TOASTMASTERS CAN HELP YOU GET READY

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Charles G. Steele,
Executive Office
partner:

At frequent intervals, the practice offices of Haskins & Sells are asked to provide speakers. Or an individual in any of those offices is invited to give a talk on short notice. The request may come from a school or college, a business organization, a civic group, or perhaps a radio station. The subjects can range from careers in accounting to income taxes to a complex federal regulation. Whatever the subject, those who ask H&S for a speaker expect the best.

It is in the cards for almost everyone who spends more than a few years with the Firm to be called on, eventually, to face an audience. When your turn comes, will you be ready?

Will you feel confident in standing up to speak before a large group of people, most of whom are strangers? Can you deliver your message clearly and effectively, without suffering the tortures of platform-fright? Can you field questions deftly, and give satisfactory answers? When it is over, will you be satisfied with your presentation? Will your listeners be glad they heard you?

One of the best ways to make sure that the answer to these questions is "yes" is to take part in Toastmasters International, the worldwide organization devoted to self-improvement in public speaking. A good many partners and managers in the Firm have trained themselves in Toastmasters, and the consensus among them is that they have benefited from it and enjoyed it.

There is a Toastmasters club in or near almost every city and town where H&S professionals work or live. If there are several clubs in one area, a person interested in joining can visit the meetings of several clubs in

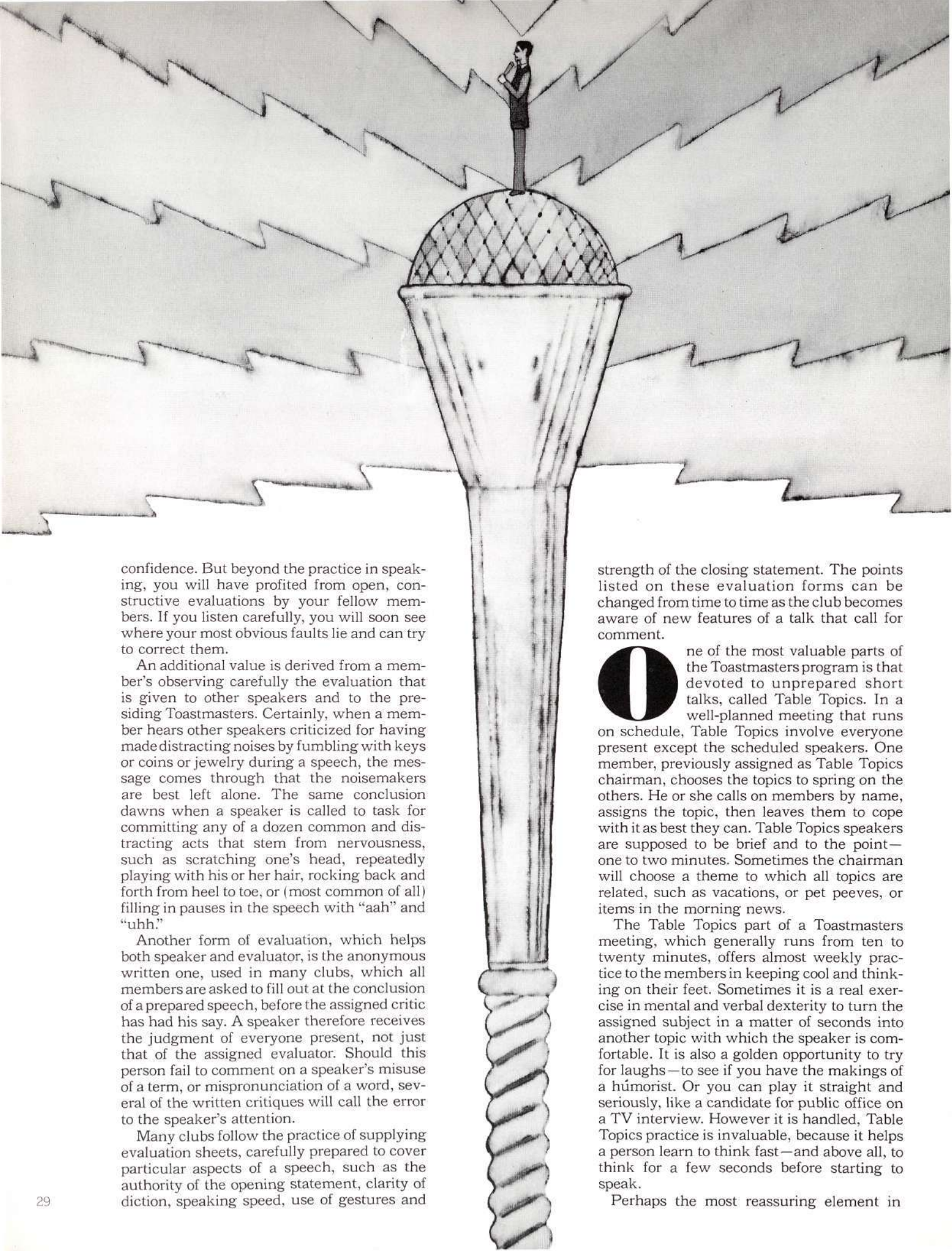
"I found that my experience in Toastmasters in Detroit (1958-61) helped me develop confidence in appearing before audiences, and practice, particularly in extemporaneous speaking, helped to build confidence."

turn and select the one that suits him or her best, according to the convenience of its meeting place and time or the conviviality of its members. In fact, there are roughly 3,500 Toastmasters clubs in the United States (and more in a dozen other countries), and every large city has a good many clubs from which to select.

In Toastmasters the members (men and women, despite the masculine sound of the name) learn by doing. Everyone takes his or her turn delivering prepared speeches of five to seven minutes in length, following a prescribed plan to develop various speaking skills. A member is also called on to give talks of one to two minutes' length with no advance warning. Everyone serves as evaluator, on his feet in front of the club, following the prepared speech given by another member. And everyone is subjected to an evaluation from a fellow member.

As the weeks pass, each member also serves as Toastmaster (chairman) of the meeting, and in that position gains experience as a master of ceremonies responsible for making the meeting run on schedule. The Toastmaster calls the meeting to order, introduces the speakers, leads the applause and in general sets the tone of the session. In addition, members rotate as general evaluator of the entire meeting, with the task of commenting on how well the speech evaluators, the Toastmaster for the day and various others have performed.

Clearly, by the time you have attended a dozen weekly (or biweekly) meetings of a Toastmasters club, you have practiced expressing yourself orally before a group in a number of different roles. In doing so, anyone is bound to grow both in ability and in self-



confidence. But beyond the practice in speaking, you will have profited from open, constructive evaluations by your fellow members. If you listen carefully, you will soon see where your most obvious faults lie and can try to correct them.

An additional value is derived from a member's observing carefully the evaluation that is given to other speakers and to the presiding Toastmasters. Certainly, when a member hears other speakers criticized for having made distracting noises by fumbling with keys or coins or jewelry during a speech, the message comes through that the noisemakers are best left alone. The same conclusion dawns when a speaker is called to task for committing any of a dozen common and distracting acts that stem from nervousness, such as scratching one's head, repeatedly playing with his or her hair, rocking back and forth from heel to toe, or (most common of all) filling in pauses in the speech with "aah" and "uhh."

Another form of evaluation, which helps both speaker and evaluator, is the anonymous written one, used in many clubs, which all members are asked to fill out at the conclusion of a prepared speech, before the assigned critic has had his say. A speaker therefore receives the judgment of everyone present, not just that of the assigned evaluator. Should this person fail to comment on a speaker's misuse of a term, or mispronunciation of a word, several of the written critiques will call the error to the speaker's attention.

Many clubs follow the practice of supplying evaluation sheets, carefully prepared to cover particular aspects of a speech, such as the authority of the opening statement, clarity of diction, speaking speed, use of gestures and

strength of the closing statement. The points listed on these evaluation forms can be changed from time to time as the club becomes aware of new features of a talk that call for comment.

One of the most valuable parts of the Toastmasters program is that devoted to unprepared short talks, called Table Topics. In a well-planned meeting that runs on schedule, Table Topics involve everyone present except the scheduled speakers. One member, previously assigned as Table Topics chairman, chooses the topics to spring on the others. He or she calls on members by name, assigns the topic, then leaves them to cope with it as best they can. Table Topics speakers are supposed to be brief and to the point—one to two minutes. Sometimes the chairman will choose a theme to which all topics are related, such as vacations, or pet peeves, or items in the morning news.

The Table Topics part of a Toastmasters meeting, which generally runs from ten to twenty minutes, offers almost weekly practice to the members in keeping cool and thinking on their feet. Sometimes it is a real exercise in mental and verbal dexterity to turn the assigned subject in a matter of seconds into another topic with which the speaker is comfortable. It is also a golden opportunity to try for laughs—to see if you have the makings of a humorist. Or you can play it straight and seriously, like a candidate for public office on a TV interview. However it is handled, Table Topics practice is invaluable, because it helps a person learn to think fast—and above all, to think for a few seconds before starting to speak.

Perhaps the most reassuring element in

Will Harris, Omaha
partner in charge, who
was in a Toastmasters
club in Chicago,
1957-59

Toastmasters is that in this organization all members are learning from one another. Although some, upon joining, have more natural speaking ability and are more experienced than other new members, everyone involved is looking for ways to improve his oral delivery. There is, therefore, a generous attitude toward the deficiencies of new members, who may be trying to speak before a group for the very first time. In fact, it is important in the Toastmasters way of doing things to accentuate the positive. Evaluators, following the suggested methods in the Toastmasters International manual distributed to all new members, congratulate the speaker on the best points in a speech first, laying stress on the aspects that were handled well. They then usually take note of the weak points and suggest ways in which the speaker can eliminate faults and avoid the most obvious weaknesses. Then the evaluators try to conclude with a positive, upbeat statement calculated to encourage the new speaker to feel self-confidence.

To some professionals who may be made of sterner stuff, or think they are, the Toastmasters style of gentle criticism may seem a bit too easygoing. But the entire purpose of Toastmasters would be negated if harsh criticism were to alienate any members or prospective members. Toastmasters International is not an obstacle course to separate the pros from the amateurs. It is, rather, an instrument through which almost everyone can improve at his or her own speed, and in which people at different levels of speaking skill can feel at home. If a good many beginning speakers join Toastmasters each year, and "graduate" one or two years later, the organization has fulfilled its purpose. Vir-

"This experience was perhaps one of the first where I had to speak to a group that was not made up of people I knew or who were sympathetic to my efforts, and it helped me build confidence beyond imagination. It was most valuable when I became involved in a political campaign and was elected mayor of Palatine, Illinois."

tually everyone who has taken part has improved in expressing himself, whether he remains a member for six months or six years.

Toastmasters have found that practice in speaking before a large group has helped them in expressing themselves to only one person, or to three or four as in a conference setting. This is of particular importance to people who find themselves in situations every working day where they need to explain and persuade, often one on one, as they say in sports. Obviously, this is much like the situation in which a representative of the Firm makes a presentation to a potential client, whether it be to one company officer or to a committee.

How do you find a Toastmasters club within convenient distance? In big cities, try the telephone directory to see if there is a local Toastmasters International organization listed. If there is, the officers of the district can supply you with a list of the clubs nearby with their meeting places and times, and with any other relevant information. Where there is no Toastmasters listing in the telephone book, a prospective member can write to Toastmasters International, 2200 North Grand Avenue, Santa Ana, California 94109, specifying the area in which he is looking for an affiliated club. A list of all nearby clubs will be sent, and the area governor of TI is informed of the inquiry and is asked to follow it up and issue an invitation to the prospect to visit one of the clubs in the area. In general, clubs are most receptive to visitors, and are constantly seeking new members because the rate of turnover among busy business and professional people is fairly high.

There is a mix of ages, and sexes, in Toastmasters clubs. Some are composed of employ-

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Gary McMahon,
Denver partner, who
was in a suburban
Denver Toastmasters
club, 1964-66

ees of one company, often through the encouragement of an executive who knows the value of Toastmasters training. In places of employment where the work schedule permits, and where management supports Toastmasters training as a form of continuing education for the staff, club meetings may be held during lunchtime. An effective Toastmasters meeting takes about one and one-half hours. Therefore, a noontime meeting on a workday usually extends over two hours, with a light lunch eaten with dispatch at the meeting place.

More often, Toastmasters clubs meet either in early evening at a restaurant, with the meeting followed by a social hour and dinner, or at about eight o'clock, after members have had dinner.

Clubs have found convenient meeting places in public libraries, town halls, schools and colleges, hotels and private homes. A club should have twenty paid-up members to be chartered (TI dues are \$9 for a half year), and at forty members a club is considered full. Because Toastmasters are almost invariably busy people with a variety of interests, attendance is rarely 100 percent. Fifteen to twenty-five members constitute a comfortable, workable meeting at which, if everything goes along on schedule, all members not otherwise assigned can have their say in the Table Topics period.

One of the great benefits of membership comes from the discipline of preparing a speech. Every member has to undergo the experience of planning a talk, thinking through just what he or she wants to say, working and reworking the outline so that everything goes in its proper place, and fitting it all into a five- to seven-minute time limit.

"I certainly would recommend activity in Toastmasters to staff accountants because it provides a forum for criticism with a 'no-holds-barred' attitude. You really learn from this frankness."

He must organize the definitive statements, the supporting data, the quotations from authority, statistics, even the jokes which he hopes will liven up the speech. This is very hard work for those who have never done it, but practice makes it easier. Then the speaker may often find that the speech when delivered does not come out just the way it was planned. Once in a while it may come out even better, because the speaker could think on his feet and was inspired, as if by a whisper from Demosthenes, with a better punch line, or joke, or more astonishing fact than the one in his speaking notes. More often, however, a beginning speaker finishes with the feeling that the speech was well prepared, but somehow it did not come out as well as he had hoped. It may have run far beyond the seven-minute limit. Or the ending, which was planned as a smashing climax, turned out to be a dud. Next time, he vows, he will be more careful in sticking to the outline, will not be rushed, will commit more of the outline to memory, and will practice his talk at home. Above all, he resolves that next time he will remain calm. And, in most cases, there is marked improvement with practice. So, going through the cycle of preparation, delivery, self-analysis and giving thought to the evaluations of fellow Toastmasters all pays off in improved performance.

Toastmasters International headquarters sends each new member a set of manuals that lead him quickly and easily through the series of steps that constitute the communication and leadership program of the organization. The purpose of each prepared speech, and each evaluation, is carefully described. The format itself was developed on



the strength of Toastmasters' experience since its founding in 1924. Accordingly, a new member is expected to start out with what is called an "ice breaker" speech, in which he tells the group something about himself and his background. In this role the new member is most likely to be at his ease, because he is on the most familiar ground possible. The course of the fifteen prepared speeches in the manual runs from this ice breaker through a variety of exercises, each of which is structured so as to offer practice in a different aspect of public speaking. Among them, to name a few, are: the speech designed to convince your audience of a strongly held conviction; the demonstration of a carefully outlined talk, starting from a definite point, proceeding logically and reaching a conclusion in the required time; the talk emphasizing the use of hands, arms, facial expressions or the whole body as a medium for gestures; the emphasis of vocal variations and voice modulation.

As one might expect, each participant in Toastmasters will end up speaking in his or her own individual style, despite the course of exercises outlined in the manual. There is no "Toastmaster style" of speaking; there is, however, a definite sequence of practices which this group has found over the years to be most effective in developing speakers and presiding officers. There is always local option in the clubs, which add their own elements to the basic Toastmasters outline. Some clubs, for instance, have (by turns) a brief grammarian's report at each meeting, in which a point of correct English usage is stressed. Others include an invocation, giving practice to those who may be asked without advance notice to say grace at a luncheon or dinner. Other variations may include occasional debates, special programs for national holidays or

anniversaries, readings from literary classics, or whatever fits the needs and desires of club members.

For a number of years Haskins & Sells has encouraged participation in Toastmasters by giving credit for the Effective Speaking course administered by the Continuing Education department in Executive Office. Details can be obtained from practice office training directors. To illustrate, we cite part of a Con Ed bulletin issued a few years ago to encourage participation in Toastmasters. It is amended slightly here because of changes brought about by the passage of time:

"If you join a Toastmasters club, the membership of which is made up of people from many different occupations, you will have a unique opportunity to widen your knowledge of the work and interests of others. You'll probably find men and women with interests as diverse as those of an engineer and an artist, an advertising executive and a labor union representative, a dentist and a salesman.

"To develop yourself broadly as a professional, learning about the lives and aspirations of others is a lifelong challenge. In return, you can serve as an ambassador for the accounting profession, dispelling misconceptions about its role in the economy and, in a positive way, letting others know about the high standards of performance by which CPAs are guided and about the complexity of the work they do. You will make firm friendships with others who, like yourself, are willing to 'go the extra mile' to improve themselves. Thus you will find that Toastmasters club members typically are enthusiastic, interesting and ambitious people who are worthy of being sought out as friends." ○